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ABSTRACT

Six steps should be taken before a school is closed: identify the reasons to justify the closing of either a specific building or one of a number of buildings; publicize the decision as early as possible; solicit the aid of an ad hoc committee or task force to independently research space or room requirements; after the ad hoc committee's report has been received, arrange for public hearing on the report; honor the requests of individual Parent Teacher Associations for special meetings; and, after the public hearings, have discussion at a board meeting, identify further information needed, and make a decision, identifying clearly what action is going to be taken and the date of the implementation. (Author/IRT)

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Remarks by

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"HOW TO CLOSE A SCHOOL WITHOUT ENRAGING THE PUBLIC"
(Clinic D-63 & E-88)

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As you look at the title of this clinic "How To Close A School Without Enraging The Public," you no doubt question if that is possible or even a true statement. Let me assure you, in our district it is not - in fact, we have proved it to be a false statement for the second time!

It goes without saying that a community gets very sentimental about "their" school - adults even more so than the students that attend. Therefore, the problem really becomes one of closing a school with the least disruption possible. Educating the "parents" of the students to fully understand - - is your goal. To begin, it is of utmost importance to have the staff, who is also very sentimental -

1. Fully appraised of the needs for the action.

2. Told where they will fit into the program after the closing.

3. Shown the importance of their role in setting the stage so the students will accept a change, and finally -

4. Assisting in educating the parents on the advantages that will be gained.

These are fine words, and a good approach but basically an impossible task - believe me, the staff doesn't want to move either.

The first experience in our district due to declining enrollment was to close our only very old building located on the edge of the district and to relocate about 240 K-6 students from a very close-knit community. In fact, the community dates back a hundred years, and is the oldest community in our district and, historically, has been opposed to being a part of the big city concept.

The second school closing will take place this fall (1976). It is in the center of the district, and will affect directly, some 600 students. Due to the ripple effect and boundary changes another 200 plus students will move to different buildings. This happens to be the school which my children attended and in which I and one other board member both live.

There are six steps that should be taken and each one is very important - continuity is necessary.

1. Do your homework and identify the reasons to justify the closing of either a specific building or one of a number of buildings.

2. Publicize through the district paper, individual school or P.T.A. letters, news media, and any other source of news release available in your area. This step should be surfaced as early as possible after a decision has been made to make a move and you must realize the continuing need to keep the public informed.

3. Solicit the aid of an ad hoc committee or task force that will independently research the needs and projection of space or room requirements. This group should not be too large - maximum possibly of 30. They should be made up of a representative from each P.T.A. in the district, representatives from each city, town, or village governing bodies, organizations such as Chamber of Commerce, Community Schools, and possibly appointments at large by the board. Also this committee should be informed as they accept the appointment, of the length of time they have to prepare a recommendation, (set a firm date for their report). They should also know exactly what is expected of them (set objectives), and they should be told who will be available from the administration office to work with them and help get information they need. Be sure they realize that although the board has to make the final decisions, their input is of vital importance. Also make sure the board and administration do not make any attempt to influence the group. In our case, they have been completely on their own after the initial meeting at which their charge was given.

4. After the report has been received, arrange for public hearings on the report - two or three as may seem appropriate and possibly at the secondary schools strategically located throughout the district. Be sure you use everyday language at the hearings. Too often school jargon is not understood by the public and therefore should be avoided. e.g. - I used the term "ripple effect" - many of our parents didn't know what that meant.

5. If individual P.T.A.'s want a special meeting, honor their request. This will likely happen in the school or schools that are most likely to be affected.

6. Once the task force report has been reviewed and public hearings held, have a discussion at a board meeting, identify further information needed, and make your decision, identifying clearly what action you are going to take and the date you will implement the action. This is very important and obviously the climax of the problem. Do not procrastinate or put it off - the problem will not go away until you put it to bed.

These steps as outlined will take from six months to a year not including any lead time you used to set the stage. Let me remind you that setting the stage as early as possible is desirable and even then there will be countless people who never heard you or perhaps believed it would not happen to their school!

This is a very "trying" experience but you must hold your "cool." Expect countless phone calls and letters - give a sympathetic ear and respond as graciously as possible, realizing the answers you give are not what they want to hear.

Your principals will be excellent P.R. people. They should have special meetings to welcome the parents to their new school building and to explain its features as well as invite the students to attend an orientation prior to the school year.

Those of you that have been on the board for some time, will remember that a dozen years ago, you pleaded with your constituents to support a building program to house the rapidly escalating student population - that was not an easy task either so "good luck" as you now reverse your plea and proceed to explain school closings due to declining enrollment.